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ABSTRACT

Individuals who are bored or dissatisfied with their career or are feeling stalled or plateaued in their career, may be suffering from the career doldrums. Although career doldrums may be associated with certain life and career stages (for example, middle age or the stabilization stage of career development), they may also depend on how personally knowledge workers view their work and its meaning. Strategies for addressing career doldrums include the following: (1) seeking career counseling; (2) making a career move; (3) adjusting to the current situation; (4) finding fulfillment by developing outside interests; and (5) applying the happenstance theory (being open to the role played by chance in a career). Possible career moves include the following: (1) moving up (seeking a position with greater responsibility); (2) making a lateral move (investigating options providing greater satisfaction rather than advancement); (3) downshifting (finding a job with fewer responsibilities); and (4) changing careers (starting over in a completely new career). Individuals experiencing a midlife career plateau transition may benefit from asking themselves questions that are designed to provide insight into the types of strategies that will be most helpful in curbing their career doldrums. (MN)

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Surviving the Career Doldrums
Practice Application Brief No. 8

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Susan Imel

PRACTICE APPLICATION 2000
BRIEF NO. 8

Surviving the Career Doldrums

> An accountant in her 40s is rising in her field and her career is thriving. She has, however, lost her enthusiasm. According to her, "I have success in my profession by all standards you can measure. I'm highly compensated. But a lot of days, I don't enjoy going to work." (Grannon 1999, p. 1E).
>
> In the process of examining their lives, a couple in midlife reevaluate their careers. Over the years, he has been promoted and is now near the top of his company but no longer feels challenged by his work. Although she is in a satisfying career, she wishes for more time for family and community work. (Hudson 1996)
>
> After rising to the top of her company's domestic marketing division, a woman is named to head the marketing of the company's newly created international area. When that position turns "sour," for the first time ever, she finds herself to be "dissatisfied professionally, shaken personally and facing a future that [is] disturbingly unclear." (Clarke 1996, p. 72)

When terms such as *stalled*, *plateaued*, or *dissatisfied* can be used to describe individuals' careers, they may be suffering from the career doldrums (Grannon 1999; Hudson 1996). Having to drag oneself to work in the morning, leaving work feeling vaguely dissatisfied, and experiencing loss of enthusiasm, crankiness, tension, and boredom are all symptoms of the career doldrums. They can occur for a number of reasons, including doing work that is not a good fit, undergoing a long period of career stabilization with no new challenges, and experiencing a change in personal goals (Grannon 1999; Hudson 1996; Kidd 1998). After describing the career doldrums in more detail, this ***Brief*** provides suggestions for addressing them.

What Are the Career Doldrums?

The notion of the career doldrums is not a new one. Individuals have suffered from the symptoms associated with this concept for as long as jobs and careers have existed. What is new is the more open acknowledgment of the phenomenon. Judith Waterman, a career counselor in San Mateo, California, has seen her client base change significantly during the last 20 years. After beginning with reentry women in the 1970s, Waterman reports that "during the 1980s, [she] was seeing high achievers who were thinking, 'How did I get here and why am I not happy?' but they were keeping it under wraps." By the mid-1990s, however, she reports that it had become more acceptable to admit career dissatisfaction (Hornaday 1995, online).

Betsy Collard, another career specialist, believes that part of this trend is related to "how personally knowledge workers view their work and the meaning of it," but that it is also related to changes in the economy. "In times of change, everybody turns inward to get clear about what's important to them, who they are, and what they want out of this" (ibid.).

The career doldrums may also be associated with certain career stages. Careers are like lives in that they go through stages that frequently include transitions into new phases. One framework (Nicholson cited in Kidd 1998) for analyzing work transitions includes the following stages:

- The *preparation* stage that occurs prior to assuming a work role.
- The *encounter* stage that covers the early days of a career experience in which individuals begin to make sense of the chosen career. This stage may include shock, rejection, and regret.
- The *adjustment* stage that involves the period in which individuals learn to do their work and make the adjustments necessary to reduce any dissonance between career choice and personal traits.
- The *stabilization* stage in which job performance is the main focus. In this stage, failure, boredom, and stagnation are not uncommon.

The symptoms associated with the career doldrums are most closely aligned with the stabilization stage. Individuals are not likely to become bored with or dissatisfied with their careers until they have had an opportunity to experience them for a while. Individuals who are in careers that are not a good fit may begin experiencing symptoms in the adjustment stage as they accommodate their careers to their personal traits and aptitudes.

In nearly every career, it is not unusual to suffer some of the symptoms associated with the career doldrums. Although many people may experience boredom or dissatisfaction with their careers, it takes courage to make changes and fear, uncertainty, and lack of momentum may hold them back (Clarke 1996). A number of strategies exist for addressing the periods when a career has become monotonous or dissatisfying.

Strategies for Addressing Career Doldrums

Individual careers are multifaceted and no single solution can be applied to those periods of dissatisfaction and boredom. What works for one person may not be possible for another. Some suggestions for dealing with the career doldrums follow.

Seek Career Counseling

For those individuals whose careers are not working out as expected or who feel that they are stuck on a plateau, career counseling can provide helpful insights about what to do. Most individuals seek career counseling so that they can engage in clarifying what they feel is important, satisfying, and worthwhile and then match that to what they do. This process of values clarification helps to focus internally on what's important to them as an individual rather than on external factors related to the benefits of particular jobs (i.e., salary, opportunities for promotion, and so forth) (Hornaday 1995). Matching belief systems to a new or existing career and or organization is more important than matching skills (Lieber 1999).

Although most people wait until they are experiencing some type of career-related pain to seek career counseling, career counseling should be thought of as a strategy to promote career wellness and used as a method for developing a plan for "career fitness" (Hornaday 1995, online). Engaging in career fitness on a regular basis can help keep the symptoms of the career doldrums at bay.

Make a Career Move

Making a career move can be as simple as making a change within the same organization or as radical as shifting into a completely different career field. A career move generally involves one of the following choices (Grannon 1999; Hudson 1996; Lieber 1999):

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- **Moving up**. One solution to the career doldrums may be to seek a position with greater responsibility. If it is not possible to do this within the current organization, then leaving may be the only option.

- **Making a lateral move**. Another option is to "move sideways" or make a lateral move (Hudson 1996, p. 265). By investigating options within the current organization, it may be possible to find work that will provide greater satisfaction. However, as in moving up, it might mean a change to another company or changing the work emphasis.

- **Downshifting**. Changing to a job with less responsibilities may be a possible option. Although the conventional wisdom advises against taking a demotion, sometimes this type of move can be a catalyst for career advancement (Dahle 1998). In addition, downshifting may be a solution for someone who is ready to give greater priority to other areas such as family, leisure, or volunteer work.

- **Changing careers**. A complete change of careers may be the only option. This strategy may be the most radical because it may mean retraining as well as "starting over." It may, however, lead to greater career satisfaction as was the case for Judith Willis (1999) who left her career as a neurologist to become an elementary school teacher.

Adjust the Current Situation

Making adaptations in a current career situation is also an option. Although similar in nature to making a lateral move, in this instance, an individual stays in the same position. Labeled "enriching the status quo" (Hudson 1996, p. 265), this strategy involves staying put and making adjustments that will lead to a more satisfactory work life such as tinkering with a job in subtle but significant ways (Grannon 1999).

Develop Outside Interests

Many people cope with the career doldrums by finding fulfillment in interests outside of their jobs. For example, through aptitude testing the accountant who was suffering a career slump found that she had unused mechanical skills. To address this need, she purchased a home that was under construction and oversaw the completion of the remaining work. She also shifted the focus of her work into another area. In combination, these strategies eased the dissatisfaction she felt with her career (Grannon 1999).

Apply the Happenstance Theory

Since careers do not follow a logical and straightforward path, being open to the role chance plays in a career is another strategy. Planned happenstance is a theory that helps individuals develop skills to recognize, create, and use chance in career opportunities. Following the theory requires individuals to exercise curiosity to explore new learning opportunities, to persist despite setbacks, to meet changing attitudes and circumstances with flexibility, to optimistically view new opportunities as possible and attainable, and to take risks by being proactive in the face of uncertain outcomes (Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz 1999). Adopting the planned happenstance model can help create a context for making some of the changes necessary to combat career doldrums because it encourages a willingness to capitalize on the chance that is part of every career.

Asking the Right Questions

"One size fits all" is not the solution to selecting a strategy or strategies to address the career doldrums. Hudson (1996) poses a series of questions for surviving a midlife career plateau transition that are also applicable to other types of situations when career satisfaction is low (p. 263):

- How can a career be developed in relation to other vital concerns?
- What has to be done to sustain balance in life and pacing in schedule?
- How can a career become a vital instrument for making a life dynamic?
- How can proven skills and abilities be used in new ways?
- How can career direction be repackaged within the flow of new jobs and openings?
- How can an existing portfolio of skills be revised to ensure it is in sync with current job openings available at this time?

Responding to these questions may provide some insights into the type of strategies that will be most helpful in curbing the career doldrums.

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